Journal of Pedagogical Research
Volume 10, Issue 1, 2026
https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202640329

Research Article

Experienced teachers' reflections and practices relating to refugee girls' needs

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Teacher's experiences supporting the social and emotional learning are key to understanding how to best support high need pupils. While social and emotional learning is one way to support children in developing social-skills and wellbeing, previous research suggests it is less effective for certain high-risk and vulnerable groups, such as refugee girls. Refugee girls are a group at high risk of struggles in education due to stress experienced when transitioning from their home nation to their host one, as well as experiencing inequity and lowered wellbeing. This study interviewed skilled teachers who have experience adapting their teaching of social and emotional learning to refugee girls. Findings showed three themes: Structural Barriers, Unique Challenges for Refugee Girls, and Narratives of Integration and Assimilation all influence learning and practice. Reflections from these experienced teachers highlight the skill and time needed to support refugee girls during social and emotional learning. This study recommends actions that could improve teachers practices to better support refugee girl's classroom experiences and integration into the UK.

Keywords: Barriers to achievement; Inequality in educational contexts; Refugees; Social-emotional learning

Article History: Submitted 29 October 2025; Revised 7 January 2026; Published online 5 March 2026

1. Introduction

Teachers' skills and pedagogical practices in the classroom are vital to the success of students' education and development. Teachers' level of training and skills relate to how well they can support students with high levels of need or unique challenges. A student's background and characteristics impacts on the experience they have in the classroom and the relationship they build with their teachers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Rasheed et al., 2020). For vulnerable learners in particular, teachers' awareness of how best to support them in the classroom is essential to ensuring equity of experience; as a lack of teacher awareness about the impact of student background on development has been shown to have as negative an impact on students, as teachers who display explicit bias (Henfield & Washington, 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

This is particularly true for the teaching of social and emotional skills development, as research suggests teachers' perception and beliefs, especially around ethnicity and gender, influence their assessment of students' academic, behavioural, social, and emotional skills (Jung & Stinnett, 2005; Rasheed et al., 2020). It is therefore important to build an understanding of how teaching practices

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How to cite: Shepherd, J. (2026). Experienced teachers' reflections and practices relating to refugee girls' needs. *Journal of Pedagogical Research, 10*(1), 309-327. https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202640329

and implementation of social-emotional learning [SEL] may be influenced by a student's background and characteristics, to better understand the barriers vulnerable students face.

Refugee and migrant students are a particularly vulnerable group, as they experience higher levels of stress than non-migrant students and have been found to experience mental ill-health at much higher rates than other children (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2010; Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008). In addition, a student's migration history and heightened experiences of stress can also undermine the development of social-emotional skills; this vulnerability, particularly when coupled with inadequate school support, can negatively impact their mental health further (Jung & Stinnett, 2005; Rasheed et al., 2020). Their school experiences can therefore have a supportive or negative impact, depending on the environment and level of support.

Students' unique characteristics play an important role in their experiences and vulnerability, and the needs of refugee girls and boys differ. There is evidence showing that refugee and migrant girls experience higher risk factors and more stress than boys (Mezzanotte, 2022); and they tend to have lower language competencies when they arrive in the UK, creating a larger barrier for them (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2010). This might contribute to research showing they tend to have more acculturation stress, fewer friendships, and to be less accepted by their peers (Alivernini et al., 2019). There is also less research focused on the needs of refugee girls, while they make up approximately 41% of arrivals to the European Union (UNICEF, 2019), they make up a smaller percentage of the research population in the literature (Pritchard, 2019).

This increased vulnerability makes them an important group to focus research on, but in addition to this added vulnerability, there is evidence that expectations for SEL are different for boys than girls. Research has shown that teachers have different expectations for the expression of social-emotional skills for boys and girls, something that needs to be explored more (Evans, 2015). An example of this is the expression of emotional traits like nurturance, which is seen as inherently feminine, so it's noticed and expected more in girls (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Research on SEL in the classroom has shown that boys are expected to participate less by teachers, while girls are seen as needing to be actively engaged during lessons and display more emotional regulation skills at a younger age (Evans, 2015; Roorda et al., 2011).

Research on the impact of gender on the efficacy of SEL shows a lack of consensus among experts, with conflicting research outcomes, some reporting boys have better outcomes and others reporting that girls have better outcomes, the consensus being that more research is needed to understand how gender influences SEL (Hallam, 2009; Hamilton & Roberts, 2017; O'Conner et al., 2017; Reiss, 2013). These contradictory findings evidence the limitations on research relating to how individual characteristics of students' impact SEL efficacy.

Teacher training and skills are also an important component of how students experience SEL in the classroom. Instruction and fidelity of SEL is led by teachers' ability to integrate the curriculum or lessons into classroom instruction (Nielsen et al., 2019). Most teachers lack the training and experience of migration and diversity of need to be expected to adapt SEL for refugee and migrant students (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). Recent research has also shown that many teachers in the United Kingdom [UK] view SEL as a priority but report they are not given time to plan or implement curriculum (Wigelsworth et al., 2022).

1.1. Conceptual Background

The focus of the research presented in this article combines literature and perspectives from psychological development, issues of equity in educational contexts, and migration. Due to the multidisciplinary subject area, there are two theoretical frameworks used to understand the research background and frame the analysis.

The first theoretical framework is social and emotional learning, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL] guide (CASEL, 2013). CASEL's (2013) five core competencies, (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision making; define the individual skills and core areas of

development enhanced by SEL. Research evidence on the effectiveness and influence of SEL has overwhelmingly shown how social and emotional skills are key to a child's ability to develop emotionally, succeed academically, and have positive mental health (Abry et al., 2016; Barry et al., 2017; Stillman et al., 2018). SEL has been shown to improve children's school behaviour, lead to better academic progression, lead to higher earning potential in adulthood, and lead to lower rates of mental health disorders (Abry et al., 2016; Barry et al., 2017; Nielsen et al., 2019; O'Conner et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2019; Stillman et al., 2018).

CASEL's core competencies and the vast body of literature supporting the positive impacts of SEL influences school policy and teaching practices in England. Unfortunately, there is research that suggests that SEL is less effective for groups of students who have heightened risk of mental ill-health or higher levels of mental health needs (O'Conner et al., 2017). It is unclear from research findings how specific characteristics or factors contribute to this difference in effectiveness.

In addition to SEL, this article uses a conceptual framework proposed by Ager and Strang (2008) which is essential to the discussion of refugee and migrant children's social and emotional skills development. Integration theory describes the varying ways that refugees adjust to their new environment, and how the hosts (in this case teacher and classroom) adjust to the incorporation of refugees and migrants, through either Integration or Assimilation (Ager & Strang, 2008). Integration describes a process where both refugee and host adjust together, that hosts work to create a welcoming and supportive environment that celebrates the refugees background, while the refugee adjusts to new norms and social expectations. Assimilation on the other hand, is where the burden of adjustment is solely the responsibility of the refugee, with no incorporation of the refugee's unique background, rather an expectation that the refugee adjusts their behaviour to match host norms as seamlessly as possible (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Research has shown that refugee and migrant children experience stress and trauma at higher levels than native children, partly due to the stress of integrating into a new environment that may or may not be welcoming (Blackmore et al., 2020; Bronstein & Montgomery, 2010; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Adding complication to this, the UK immigration policy is one that promotes Assimilation and ongoing anti-immigrant rhetoric is stressful for refugees and migrants (Da Lomba, 2010; Zgonjanin, 2022).

Key to Integration for children is the ability to build strong bonds with other children and adults in their new community (Ager & Strang, 2008; Fazel & Betancourt, 2018; Yi Cheung & Phillimore, 2014). These bonds also support young refugee children in developing social skills and coping with stress from migration.

1.2. Current study

The previous literature from SEL, migration, and social justice in education focused on refugees and migrants, shows a need to understand the way that experienced teachers, who have skills and training, support refugee girls in adjusting to and integrating into their classroom. The perspectives and recommendations gathered from teachers who have had experience supporting refugees girls for years is invaluable to understanding more about how inexperienced teachers can adjust their practices to better support the social and emotional development of refugee girls. This research was guided by the desire to understand:

RQ) What are experienced primary school teachers' perspectives on and experiences of teaching social-emotional skills to refugee girls?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study used a multidisciplinary design (combining research and theoretical perspectives from Psychology, Social Justice in Education, and Migration). Which aims to understand the multifaceted experience of refugee girls social-emotional development as completely as possible. While there is a great deal of past literature on social-emotional development and the use of

interventions in schools to enhance SEL, one critique is that existing research has not fully taken into account all aspects of teachers' and students' context, particularly regarding differences in ethnicity, gender, language skills, and social norms (Durlak, 2016; O'Conner et al., 2017). These limitations lead to a lack of understanding around the ways that bias, gender differences, and racism can impact social-emotional skills and mental health of minority children. This study is underpinned by the epistemological position of contextualism, the desire to understand participants' views within the contexts that they exist (Cohen et al., 2017) and the ontological perspective of Critical Realism, which assumes that reality is experienced and interpreted based on our context (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Using a multidisciplinary design and the combination of perspectives and approaches to understand this topic with as much complexity and depth as possible, allows for the exploration of issues related to oppression and social justice in educational contexts, while exploring wellbeing, social-emotional development, and socio-legal rights of refugees.

2.2. Participant Selection and Context

This research was focused on the perspectives of primary school teachers in England. This specific focus was due to the differences between wellbeing curricula requirements between England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. Each country in the UK has its own educational requirements, which lead to differences in curriculum that impact teaching and pedagogy.

Participant were primary school teachers who had (1) mid to high levels of years teaching (5+ minimum), (2) identified that they had experience teaching multiple refugee girls in their classrooms during that time, and (3) had experience supporting the social-emotional skill development of the children in their classrooms.

Schools in the UK have not collected immigration status data on children since 2018, due to concerns around how this data would be used, it is therefore difficult to know how many schools have high numbers of refugees currently. Ethnicity and first language data tend to be suggested proxy measures for the number of refugee children in a local authority area or school (Bolloten & Spafford, 2005). In England in 2022, approximately 27% of pupils were from ethnic minority backgrounds, and 21% fell into the category 'first language is known or believed to be other than English' (Department for Education, 2022). This gives an incomplete picture, as first language and minority background are not necessarily indicators of refugee or immigration status.

Prior to recruitment, ethical approval was granted by the University of York Department of Education ethics committee. Recruitment took place over social media and through emails to schools, educational authorities, and refugee organisations. Sixty-seven prospective participants completed the interest form online or emailed the researcher directly. Use of a pre-screening form or email pre-screening was used to collect teacher interest and screen for fit. Consent form was signed prior to each interview.

Five participants met the requirements for inclusion into the research study and agreed to take part. At the time of interview, participants had the following teaching experience: one had taught for five years, two had taught for six years, one had taught for 10 years, and one taught for 20+ years. Two identified as women and three as men. All had experience with a high number of refugee girls in their classrooms, although exact enrolment numbers were not collected. Two taught in schools in Northern England and three taught in schools in the greater London area.

2.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect participants' unique experiences and perspectives. Interviews took place on Zoom and lasted an average of 43 minutes. Questions focused on the support and training the participating teachers receive, their unique skills in supporting refugee girls social-emotional development, and their perspectives and values relating to social-emotional skills and refugee girls (see Appendix 1). An area of particular interest was their use of pedagogical practices to support social inclusion in the classroom and how they view the systemic challenges faced by refugee girls in England. The semi-structured approach allowed for flexibility

in the use of the questions, as the goal was to gain an in-depth account of each unique participant's experience. This flexibility led to differences in responses and experience, allowing for richer data. In addition, during data collection the Department for Education [DfE] released new guidance focused heavily on academic topics and minimising wellbeing and mental health. For three of the interviews, this change was explored.

All interviews took place on Zoom video calling software and were recorded. Recordings were kept until the transcript was completed and participants were given the opportunity to review. After the 30-day review period, the recording was deleted, and identifying information was removed from the transcript.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo (version as of March 2020). Reflexive Thematic Analysis was employed to analyse the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach prioritises building an understanding of participants' experiences and unique perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive Thematic Analysis also uses researcher subjectivity as a method of interpretation and theme 'generation'. This seemed particularly useful for this study as the researcher holds identities that could influence data collection and analysis, as explored in the Positionality section.

The analysis progression was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) "Phases of thematic analysis" (p. 87) in a nonlinear way. During transcription there was the (1) Familiarisation phase, along with noting down initial thoughts and coding ideas in a reflective journal; then (2) generation of initial codes, these codes evolved and changed, some codes turned into multiple subcodes, new codes were used, and some existing codes were renamed. After coding all transcripts, (3) examination of all codes for potential patterns across the transcripts began followed by (4) theme generation, which lead to more coding and exploration into the transcripts, then (5) writing of the draft report, which lead to returning to the transcripts and codes, to refine and rework themes and analysis. This process continued in an ongoing way while writing and involved both engagement with the data and time away to think and process. At every stage use of a reflexive journal to assisted in refining the analysis.

2.5. Positionality

As mentioned earlier, Contextualism considers participant context, but is inclusive of researcher context as well. It is impossible to entirely separate or remove from the process the researcher's influence and perspective. Reflexivity requires an acknowledgment that the research presented in this article is influenced by researcher background, education, and experiences. The researcher is a migrant who moved to the UK to pursue higher education and is raising a young migrant child of colour who is enrolled in primary school in England. These identities and background are both a strength, as they give a unique perspective and insight, and something to manage when conducting this research, as they could interfere with how participants respond and interact with the questions and topics investigated. My accent, for example, shows my nationality, which could change the way that participants respond to my questions. The use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis was chosen to facilitate ongoing reflection throughout the data collection and analysis process. While reading the interview transcripts, I found that I had emotional reactions and judgement to some of the comments; additionally, I feel a strong connection with primary school teachers and the hard work they do, so I wanted to portray them positively, and worried I was being too judgemental. The use of a reflexive journal assisted me in understanding my subjective interpretation and reactions to the data collected, giving greater insight and encouraging reflexivity. This led me to allow my experiences and reactions to inform my analysis but not lead the analysis. Additionally, the use of four-digit codes for each participant allowed some emotional separation between me and the transcripts while coding.

3. Findings and Discussion

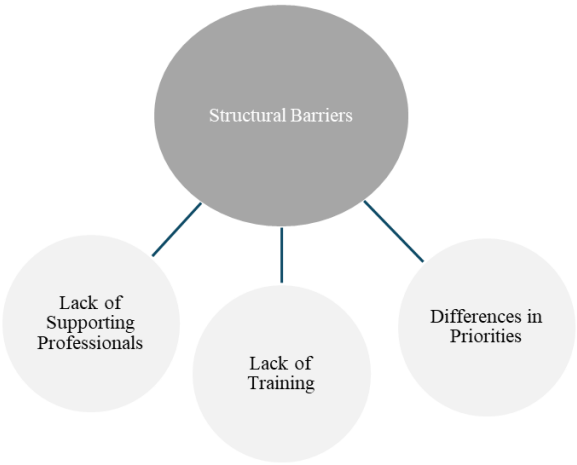
3.1. Themes Overview

Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the participants' transcripts led to me identifying three themes: Structural Barriers (Figure 1), Unique Challenges for Refugee Girls (Figure 2), and Narratives of Integration and Assimilation (Figure 3), each with subthemes. These three themes represent different facets of teachers' perspectives and practice in relation to refugee girls' inclusion in the classroom community and experiences of challenges, both systemic and personal.

3.1.1. Theme: Structural barriers

The Structural Barriers theme shows how school systems in place made it harder for teachers to meet the needs of refugee girls. All three sub-themes in this theme show a consistent mismatch between teachers' needs and the resources and support offered. The theme's development was influenced by guidance from the DfE which prioritises academic subjects, with minimal focus on wellbeing, and the heightened wellbeing needs of refugee girls. Previous research has shown that while teachers may want to support their students' wellbeing, they do not feel equipped or trained to handle mental ill-health, particularly for high need students (Shelemy et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2013; Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019). The teachers interviewed for this research reinforced through their responses the rising mental health and wellbeing needs in the UK primary school population and the barriers they experience when trying to meet their students' needs.

Figure 1
Theme: Structural Barriers



Sub-theme 1: Lack of Supporting Professional Staff. Teachers interviewed expressed how the level of support offered at their school influenced how able they felt to support their refugee students. Four teachers expressed a lack of support in their school, classroom, and the larger educational system in the UK.

> So I've got the girl from Ukraine that's just started this week who speaks no English and obviously she's come from highly traumatised situation and I've just basically been left to get on with it by myself….To me, I feel there's no support at all. (Participant 2366)

This teacher's experience of feeling that there was no support was similar to other teachers' stated experiences. Access to other support professionals, such as teaching assistants [TA], mental health professionals, and outside refugee agencies, was reported to be lacking for four of the five teachers interviewed. Interviewees expressed a shared feeling that they were expected to just adjust to supporting the students in their class (refugee, migrant, and home students), but without having been offered additional support, training, or resources. When asked if any outside agencies or services have engaged with the refugee students in their classroom or in their school, four of the

five said no: "so far, I'd say, I haven't really heard of any support they are receiving for these kids." (Participant 5677).

A TA seems to make a big difference in teachers' feeling confident that they could support their refugee students, specifically when they have a high proportion of them in their classroom. One teacher described how the TA in their classroom made it possible to work one on one with some refugee students, and the TA was able to stay in the classroom if a student needed additional emotional support.

> So one child was like that the other day she, she was in the heads office for something, but she afterwards totally breakdown and couldn't do anything, and I knew that there'd be no point in her sitting down and doing her science, so I just took her out, again i'm very lucky because i've got the extra support in the classroom. (Participant 2366)

In contrast another teacher shared that she felt that her lack of teaching assistant and the high number of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in her class meant that her students weren't progressing as quickly as she would like because she is unable to offer much individual support.

> I think it's 60% EAL in this class, of the full class, so in terms of needing and wanting more support, I know that if I had a TA they would be making more progress than they do… (Participant 2477).

While this sub-theme was very present for four of the five teachers, one teacher described how they have the right level of support at their school. They shared that the learning mentors at their school conduct a pre-assessment on the student's level of language, background, and other needs. The learning mentors also handled any issues related to emotional wellbeing and were able to provide additional support. This teacher highlighted an awareness that the level of support in their school made it possible for them to feel that they were able to support the refugee students in their classroom well, saying:

> We've got you know five or so per cent, maybe a little bit more, who…EAL, we have less than 10% who have special educational needs and even fewer than that who have actual emotional health care plans or severe disabilities…. if we would have, for example, a one-off year group that had 20 out of 60 children who had migrant status, for example, we would struggle to deal with that. (Participant 5388)

This teacher's level of support seems to be possible due to a combination of low levels of need at their school and an adequate level of resources in their school and local authority area. This interviewee's experience shows that having sufficient support is possible, yet drawing on the other teachers' responses, this situation was not typical for those interviewed. Instead, levels of need, of resources, and a policy-practice gap between teachers' needs and the support they receive influences teachers' individual experiences. Previous research has found similar, that teachers reported a lack of access to adequate resources and supportive professionals, particularly mental health professionals (Shelemy et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2013; Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019).

Sub-theme 2: Lack of Training. All interviewees were asked if they received training around refugee needs or social-emotional skill development. All responded that they had not received any training on these topics. One interviewee mentioned that prior to becoming a teacher (during their undergraduate degree) they had trained in psychology, but since starting teacher training, they had not received training on social-emotional skills or wellbeing.

Teacher training and skill level play an important role in social-emotional development, experts have suggested that teachers' understanding of cultural background, both their own and their students, is important to increasing equity of instruction (Boyle & Charles, 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). Individual characteristics such as race (of both student and teacher) impact on the relationship between teachers and their students, as well as on the acquisition of social-emotional skills (Rasheed et al., 2020). Koehler and Schneider (2019) discussed how most teachers lack training on migration and diversity. This lack of awareness can lead to potentially harmful impacts of cultural incongruence or misunderstandings that influence communication and relationship development (Sciuchetti, 2017).

The lack of training reported by the interviewees was not unexpected because the DfE does not require teacher training programmes or schools to provide training on social-emotional skills or wellbeing. All teachers interviewed also noted that they have experience using PSHE (Personal, Social, and Health Education), which is the curriculum used for learning related to relationships, health, life skills, and social-emotional skills. However, recent research suggests that the social-emotional skills included in the most common curricula used in UK primary schools are inconsistent across schools and fail to cover all skills viewed as necessary by research (Wigelsworth et al., 2022). They also do not include awareness of how cultural background, ethnicity, or gender impact the learning and teaching of social-emotional skills. All the teachers interviewed expressed a desire to help and support their students, based on these responses I believe they would be open to training and guidance. As participant 2366 said "I'm desperate for training on it and advice."… "so I think that would be hugely beneficial to schools."

Sub-theme 3: Differences in Priorities (Holistic development or Reading & Maths). One pressing issue facing all students is the navigation of time spent on their emotional wellbeing compared to time focused on academic subjects, such as reading and maths. While the DfE has expressed an expectation that teachers will teach social-emotional skills and identify wellbeing concerns (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2018), there is a lack of clear guidance. This shows a mismatch in priorities which impacts resource allocation and is hindering efforts to improve wellbeing. Interviewees expressed that they were under pressure following the pandemic to catch up their students in academic subjects without time to focus on inclusion of refugee students or their social-emotional development.

> ...we're under so much pressure to get certain things done and covered... But basically, that the children can't learn unless they they feel in the right kind of emotional place to learn. (Participant 2366)

The reported pressure to catch up in academic subjects following the pandemic, the focus in compulsory guidance on academic progress alone, and the lack of training as discussed in the last section all contribute to potential inequity. One consistent response from the teachers interviewed was that their perspective is that wellbeing generally and social-emotional skill development is key to all students' ability to succeed.

> ...able to go home smiling from school, doesn't it, doesn't matter what they learning as long as long as their happy and looked after, I think, that's what I would say. (Participant 2477)

The perspective that wellbeing and emotional regulation are necessary for academic subjects to be properly absorbed by students is at odds with the educational priorities set by the DfE. While conducting these interviews new curriculum guidance was issued by the DfE, which focused entirely on academic subjects (Department for Education, 2021). Three teachers were asked about this new guidance. Participant 5266 stated that: "Most teachers don't give DfE any consideration, and if we did we probably wouldn't agree with much of it."

This disconnect between policy from the DfE and the interviewed teachers' perspectives and practice is creating an unfortunate divide that contributes to the structural barriers faced by teachers when supporting refugee students. It also adds to the interviewees feeling that they are being: "Basically been left to get on with it by myself." (Participant 2366)

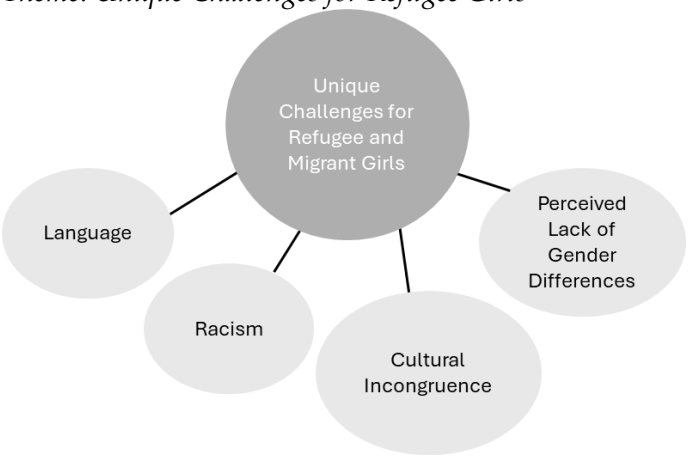
3.1.2. Theme: Unique challenges for refugee girls

The Unique Challenges for Refugee Girls theme covers specific challenges that are related to refugee students' identities and experience, as interpreted through the perspectives of the teachers interviewed for this study. Four sub-themes are evident: Language, Racism, Cultural Incongruence, and Perceived Lack of Gender Differences.

These sub-themes relate heavily to those in Structural Barriers. Language is something that effects most refugees and immigrants, but there is minimal support offered through UK schools. Unlike the last theme though, there is less agreement across the responses in this theme. Racism is

a prime example, as it was only really raised by one teacher and yet seems something that would be experienced by a lot of the refugees coming to the UK.

Figure 2
Theme: Unique Challenges for Refugee Girls



Sub-theme 1: Language. Interviewees identified multiple barriers to academic achievement for their refugee students, but language barrier was the one discussed most frequently and consistently. Lack of English language ability was seen as a barrier for refugee children in their adjustment to the UK because all academic, social, and emotional curricula require some basic understanding of English. As one teacher put it: "It's the barrier, the barrier to entry isn't it just…" (Participant 5388).

This is not to say that teachers reported being unable to provide support. One interviewee noted that they use: "Yeah a lot of visuals, a lot of simple sentences" (Participant 2477); to help refugee students with their language skills.

All interviewed teachers noted that they use a variety of tools to support their students' language ability but faced resource and time challenges. Interviewees highlighted the need for additional support or resources to help with language acquisition and adjustment to the UK. Previous research has shown that language acquisition is important to building social relationships with those from the host society, which is an important part of Integration (Strang & Ager, 2010). Refugee girls and women tend to have lower language competencies than refugee men and boys when they enter the country, so it can be a more considerable barrier for them (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2010). The limitations of the available tools and strategies teachers use for refugee children have been outlined by one interviewee:

> I think if there was an EAL specific section or an EAL specific time of the curriculum that they could spend their time making sure that we… make sure that they [refugee students] understand exactly what's going on and that we're not assuming and we're not relying on just visuals (Participant 2477).

Past literature notes that some countries offer language classes for both parents and children, which cover issues such as domestic legislation and social conventions, to assist refugees in their integration (McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021). In contrast, the UK does not offer this type of integration support as UK immigration policy embraces an Assimilation perspective, which places the burden of change on refugees, rather than on the UK's (state institutions and civil society's) adjustment to the needs of refugees. Using an Assimilation perspective means that language competency at time of entry is seen as a key criterion for access and assimilation (Yi Cheung & Phillimore, 2014). The Refugee Convention states that refugee children should receive equivalent education to native children but does not include specific language requiring support that would lead to equity of educational provision, such as language support ("Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," 1951). A number of UN policy documents clearly highlight that the right to education of refugee children cannot be fully realised in the absence of adequate language skills development support.

The teachers interviewed seemed to understand and see language skills as a barrier faced by the refugee girls in their classes, but one also expressed that it was not the most important thing to focus on as a teacher. They shared the following advice for new teachers or those without experience with refugee students:

> I would say to have the focus not on the English. Have the focus on their wellbeing and integrating them into the class where they are happy, that they realise that this is a safe space for them. And the English will come. (Participant 2366)

This perspective fits in with the priorities already expressed by the teachers interviewed, that wellbeing is more important than academic subjects, for all students. Although this does not negate the need for additional language support.

Sub-theme 2: Racism. While there are many challenges that are universal for refugee students, such as language barriers and adjustment to a new host country, some refugees also experience racism. One interviewee (participant 5677) spoke extensively about racism and issues of racist bullying that affected their students. They were the only participant to share such intense concerns around racially motivated bullying, although one other interviewee did share concerns around skin colour differences in less diverse communities and how this impacts integration and acceptance.

Participant 5677's response stands out for several reasons, one being that they focused primarily on racism as the primary hardship faced by refugee girls and minimised the impact of gender and language differences as reasons refugee girls struggle to Integrate into their host community. Additionally, this participant was also the only interviewee with a non-British accent, which may also suggest that their own personal experiences influence how they perceive the difficulties faced by their students.

Through my analysis, I noticed that only one of the other four interviewees noted racial or ethnic differences, and they spoke about it being an issue in a rural, white majority community, not in their current urban school. For the most part, ethnicity and race were not present in my discussions with teachers. There was a focus on other characteristics, such as language barriers, cultural differences that can lead to incongruence and misunderstanding, and some gender differences in relation to students' ability to speak up or their expression of emotions. They seemed unaware of the structural elements of inequality, or they did not come up in our conversation. I interpret this lack of racial awareness as connected to the demographics of primary school teachers in the UK, with only 6% from an ethnic minority background (Department for Education, 2022); their lack of personal experiences of racism or ethnic discrimination may mean that they are less likely to be aware of ethnic minority students' experiences. It is also possible that they are unaware of the subtle forms of racial discrimination that can happen in the classroom and community because they lack lived experience. Previous research has found that colour-blindness (ignoring how differences influence equity of experience in favour of "equality" of offering) can harm refugee students in the same way that explicit bias can (Henfield & Washington, 2012).

A mismatch between teacher and student backgrounds can also impact learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Background is inclusive of a variety of characteristics, but when looking at race and ethnicity mismatch, the is a major impact on student and teacher relationships (Rasheed et al., 2020). As I did not collect teacher ethnicity as part of this research, I cannot conclusively say the ethnicity of the teachers I spoke with, but with an awareness of how only 6% of primary school teachers in the UK are from ethnic minority backgrounds and with 34.8% of students being from ethnic minority backgrounds, a mismatch between teacher and student is likely (Department for Education, 2021; Office for National Statistics., 2021). This becomes then a question of training and experience for teachers, if they were provided with training on implicit bias and understanding of how racism may present for ethnic minority, migrant, and refugee students, they may have responded differently in the interviews.

Sub-theme 3: Cultural Incongruence. Cultural Incongruence was a sub-theme that was present throughout my conversations with teachers. All the teachers interviewed spoke of differences in cultural expectations and background which impacted their refugee students' inclusion into the classroom and their social-emotional skill development. This is to be expected, as previous research has shown that social-emotional skills are culturally interpreted and established, which can impact cross-cultural learning (Boyle & Charles, 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Sciuchetti, 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). During my conversations with teachers, they seemed aware of the impact of cultural differences and how it related to their refugee students. It is worth noting that cultural differences was spoken about by participants as separate from gender-based differences, which was explicitly asked about.

One teacher talked about how their students who were used to very different educational environments often have a hard time adjusting to some of the techniques used in the UK classroom.

> ...we use is partner talk and partner time and group discussions and all of that, they don't do that in South Korea so she said it was quite strange for her to get used to, but she did…she did acknowledge that…that it was different and uncomfortable to start off with. (Participant 2477)

Along similar lines, another teacher expressed how some students struggle with knowing social cues and expected behaviour in the classroom.

> Misinterpreting social cues and eye contact and things like that" giving one specific example "while her behaviour was really good she couldn't, she found it difficult to unlearn habits like if she wants to teachers attention she'd get up and walk across the classroom. (Participant 5266).

When teachers discussed these differences, they did so with an attitude of noticing differences and encouraging their students to adjust these behaviours or expectations to better match the cultural expectations of the UK. A good example of this was when asked about social-emotional skills instruction a teacher stated: "I'm a big advocate of children communicating verbally and openly" (5266).

The issue with this expectation is that it may not be normative or appropriate in a child's background culture to communicate explicitly with a teacher, as cultural context and background impacts communication style and expectations (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). This could be especially true if we consider the impact of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and gender match (girl with a male teacher versus a girl with a female teacher). Refugee students are more likely to communicate or exhibit emotional reactions, such as stress, in a way that is normative to their country of origin (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2010). This teacher's expectations are potentially normative from a UK standard but are potentially incongruent with a refugee child's background, although this would depend on the child's unique background.

Sub-theme 4: Perceived Lack of Gender Differences. I was interested in the unique challenges faced by refugee girls, and if and how their gender impacts their learning of social-emotional skills. I asked teachers about the differences and similarities in social-emotional skills that they found between boys and girls. Most of the interviewees told me that they do not adjust their teaching of social-emotional skills based on gender, as in their view the needs and experiences of students are not linked to their gender. When asked whether they noticed differences in behaviour in the classroom between girls and boys they did provide some examples – yet they rather ascribed these behavioural differences to the girls' cultural background rather than gender. Responses seemed to see these behavioural differences as disconnected from gender, but instead connected to culture.

> A lot of the boys express it [emotions] through anger and a lot of girls will express it through going a bit quieter and internalising it a bit more, but they will talk after they've had some time to kind of think about it, all, but I really think it's a cultural thing as well. (Participant 2366)

This idea that cultural expectations around social behaviour were more influential than gender was present in the responses of the other participants.

> I would say what I really noticed among the girls is their inability to speak up when they are confronted with a particular challenge, because of the orientation they had or where they're coming from their environment, how they found themselves. that has been it. (Participant 5677)

These examples illustrate that while the teachers interviewed might not perceive the differences in behaviour to be purely due to gender, they are aware of differences between their refugee girls and the other students in the class. One teacher highlighted that she did not believe the differences in behaviour were due to gender or culture, but rather the religion of the child.

> The only thing and it's not, I suppose it is migrant, but it could just be a religion thing is being sensitive to…like I said, one of my children, one of my girl… female children is is Muslim. the only gender difference in that's probably mainly due to religion, rather than the fact that she's a migrant. (Participant 2477)

The example this teacher raised highlights that as a girl from a Muslim family who recently came to the UK, she has needs that may be different from her peers. There seems to be a lack of awareness on all the interviewees part of the intersectionality of identities for refugee girls. Leading on from the last sub-theme, Cultural Incongruence, the teachers I interviewed seemed to have some understanding of cultural differences and how they affect communication, social interactions, behaviour, and emotional expression. But they did not have as good an understanding of the impacts of gender, nor how it interacts with other characteristics or social-emotional skills.

Research has shown that gender (of teachers and students) has an impact on perceptions, communication, behavioural expectations, and pedagogical practices of social-emotional skills (Evans, 2015). Traits like nurturance and positive social skills are seen as innately feminine (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Emotional distress is also shown to be gendered in the way it is expressed, as girls tend to show internalised emotional reactions more than externalised ones (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2010).

One teacher recounted differences that they had observed in relation to their refugee girls, an observation which in turn implies a gendered stereotypical view: "And there's always oft.., often girl issues. Misinterpreting social cues and eye contact and things like that." (Participant 5266)

This teacher seemed to be suggesting that difficulties in reading social cues were not culturally based but rather based on an innate gender difference – it should be noted that this participant is male.

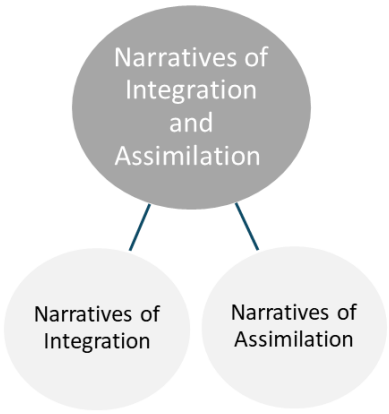
It is interesting then that the teachers interviewed seemed to not believe that there were many gender-based differences and instead focused on the cultural differences relating to characteristics such as country of origin, language, and religion. I interpret this as partially failing to understand the intersectionality of characteristics that are part of refugee students' identity as it may be hard to separate the impacts of gender from those of religion for example, when both interact to affect a child's behaviour. It is also possible that so much work has been done to increase gender equity in educational settings in the UK that it is difficult for teachers to view gender as having an impact on a child's learning. There is research that shows the covert ways that we enact gendered expectations socially definitely impact learning, such as literature that shows that teachers tend to use more emotionally based words with girls (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003), and tend to expect less from boys in SEL lessons (Evans, 2015). Research has shown that these differences in expectations influence teachers' perspectives and practices in the classroom, even if this is not being seen by those interviewed.

3.1.3. Theme: Narratives of integration and assimilation

While exploring the transcripts from these interviews, I found there was a consistent narrative of teachers wanting to do the best for their students, to support their emotional wellbeing, to welcome them into the school community, and to embrace their adjustment to the social norms within the UK – however, there was also a tendency to do so by encouraging the child to change and to adjust. Language and wording used invoked the practice and perspective of both

Assimilation, that the refugee children should adjust themselves to their new environment to better fit in, and Integration, that the community changes and evolves along with the refugee child (Strang & Ager, 2010).

Figure 3
Theme: Narratives of Integration and Assimilation



Sub-theme 1: Narratives of Integration. The sub-theme Narratives of Integration refers to the language used that was suggestive of an Integration perspective and approach (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Ager, 2010). The responses of two interviewees portrayed a narrative of Integration, specifically that the community (in this case the classroom) would need to evolve and change to support the refugee child, while the refugee child adjusted to fit within the community.

> Integrating with what they used to in their own cultures and with with the other children and the class….they can share their experiences and then other children start to understand a little bit more about how they feel about things, and what they go through, and their life experiences. (Participant 2366)

In this quote, the teacher explicitly used the term "integrating" and listed ways to support the child in adjusting while also encouraging the rest of the class to understand the child's cultural background and unique experiences. Another teacher uses less explicit language about integration but does share that the school community is very diverse and welcoming: "we, have, are very welcoming to new families, to new languages, to everything." (Participant 2477)

Both of these examples use language that encourages an open exchange of experience and an honouring of the value of the child's background and culture while encouraging them to be incorporated into their new host culture (the UK and school). While some theorists have suggested that this process can be stressful for the refugee child (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008; Fazel & Betancourt, 2018), it is suggested to be the most positive long-term, as it supports their full integration into their new home without losing their unique identity (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Narratives of Integration do not fully eliminate the presence or use of 'othering' language that teachers and other students can use in reference to refugee children, but it does show the variation in response and perspective that could potentially ameliorate the effects of 'othering' perspectives. Integration narratives also frame the students' experiences as strengths that enhance the classroom environment and the learning experience for all students.

Sub-theme 2: Narratives of Assimilation. The 'Narratives of Assimilation' sub-theme reflects language used that was suggestive of an Assimilation perspective, which places the burden for change and adjustment entirely on the refugee student (Ager & Strang, 2008). It does so because it sees value in social cohesion, and identifies this as an absence of conflict or norm deviation within a population (Ager & Strang, 2008). Assimilation perspectives do not value refugee students' culture of origin or unique background as something that could contribute positively to the classroom community, but rather as something hindering their ability to adjust. Whilst not necessarily negative, the perspectives and practices it encourages tend to view the refugee child's

social skills and expectations as something that needs to change for them to fit in the UK (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Throughout three of the interviews, there was language used that illustrated narratives of Assimilation.

> When they look at other kids and see how they act and how they behave they feel they don't fit into the culture." and talked about needing to teach them "how to incorporate them to this society. (Participant 5677)

This example shows that the teacher views the child's experiences up until they arrive in the UK as something that prevents them from fitting in, or as a deficit. The child's previous social experiences as something that creates cultural incongruence and needs to be adjusted for them to thrive in the UK. One teacher goes on to say,

> So you need to make sure showing empathy for cultural differences, showing empathy for the fact they're settling into a country and with that, if you're managing low level behaviour like that you don't escalate at the same rate that you would, if it was a child who was challenging you intentionally. (Participant 5266)

While this teacher is speaking about the need to show additional empathy, there is also an assumption within the quote that the child's behaviour needs behavioural correction, or consequences given that it is outside the norms of what is expected in a UK classroom. This teacher's language implies that the cultural incongruence the child experiences is something that could lead to discipline and while they are encouraging empathy, their perspective on the child's social skills as a deficit that needs to be overcome is still evident in their response. They are not suggesting that the teacher should adjust their instruction style or expectations to the child's previous educational experiences.

None of these examples suggest ill intentions about their students, in fact throughout the interviews I noted a desire to do well and show empathy toward refugee students. However, there was still an underlying assumption that the burden for change and adjustment was on the child, that the refugee was the one that needed to learn, change, and develop awareness because their experiences prior to entering a UK classroom made them have deficits of knowledge and skills.

There is one final way that teachers' language illustrated a narrative of Assimilation, and this was through 'othering' the family expectations and behaviour. 'Othering' involves the highlighting of differences along with language that creates a dichotomy of 'us' and 'them'. This language implies uniformity in both groups and highlights differences as something that defines the boundaries of 'us' versus 'them'. All the teachers interviewed used 'othering' language to some degree, however, the teachers' responses who were included in the Narratives of Assimilation sub-theme had the most extreme language related to 'othering', in addition to their language implying that the burden of adjustment was on the refugee child only.

One example of 'othering' language is from a teacher discussing the difficulty at times communicating with parents from very different backgrounds, who may hold very different beliefs around discipline and behaviour.

> Because you can't tell them how to live their life out of school, but you can at least give them the proper information so that they're actually more aware can hopefully make the right decisions. (Participant 5388)

The wording used to describe the exchange with parents, particularly the words "*proper*" and "*right*" give the impression of a value judgement that the parents' perspective and beliefs are not as valid as those of the teachers.

One interviewee used even stronger wording, suggesting a perspective which espoused the superiority of the UK over the cultures and countries refugee students have emigrated from:

> London, which has got some of the most famous buildings and sites in the world is just awe striking, that you take that for granted when you're brought up here but imagine you've been brought up in a slum in in a third world country and suddenly you're looking at Big Ben and the millennium eye and, the London eye and all these things that you might have even been lucky enough to see a

> photograph of once, being taught by people who understand, like by people who have been properly educated and therefore can educate better than the resources available, where you're from. Like, so unless I don't know what they're coming from, but what they're coming to, from a child who doesn't need to worry about rent prices and petrol and shit government. Like if there's no reason for them to have mental health problems is this is the best time of their life for most of them. (Participant 5266)

This teachers' perspectives feel aligned with much of the narrative in the UK around refugees, that they have very little to offer, are a problem, and that the UK is doing them a favour (Zgonjanin, 2022). This discourse, which erases the manifold differences between and among refugees, reflects a notion of superiority that discards the experiences or skills that these individuals can contribute to the classroom and society more broadly. It also shifts the lens towards those 'deserving' and those 'undeserving' (Da Lomba, 2010; Sale, 2005) away from the actual legal obligations which the UK has voluntarily agreed to be bound by under international refugee and human rights conventions.

4. Conclusion

Perspectives of experienced teachers matter because refugee students face a lot of adversity, stress, and trauma during their migration journey and in adjusting to the UK, which can be impacted negatively or positively by their teacher. The teachers interviewed noted and discussed the variety of structural barriers and challenges faced by refugee children, and they also expressed a desire to support and help the children in their classroom. However, three of the five also shared perspectives that placed the burden for change on the child and saw their intersecting identities as a deficit to be overcome. This narrative is one that fits with the political and social discourse around immigrants in the UK, but it also does a disservice to the child, because it places them in the position of needing to change to be accepted, rather than celebrating how their unique background makes the UK a better and more diverse place.

Based on my experiences meeting and discussing refugee girls with these teachers, I see this as a desire to prepare the child for a society that does not fully accept them. One teacher's quote resonated; in that they expressed the need to teach their refugee girls "*how to incorporate them to this society*" (Participant 5677). This teacher was particularly concerned with the prejudice and racism that their students encounter in the UK. I interpreted this quote as a desire to teach the child how to exist in the UK without being hurt by the anti-immigrant sentiments they will encounter. My experience overall with these teachers is that they care deeply about their students, but they do not feel equipped to offer them the support they think is required due to structural barriers. Despite the interviews' stated intention to speak with teachers with unique experiences to pass on, all the teachers I spoke with questioned whether they had the skills or experiences to help with my research. I think this illustrates they had a lot to share, but the fact that they feel ill-equipped is a major failing of both the UK's educational and immigration systems.

5. Implications

The most important implication from this study is that teachers do not have the support or resources they need to support their refugee students. Teachers reported there is not enough training or supporting professionals, and multiple structural barriers exist that prevent them from being able to support all their students, but refugee girls particularly. This information is coming from experienced teachers who have the skills and knowledge to identify gaps in support.

While teachers hold a lot of responsibility already, these findings do suggest that being more aware of intersectionality and how background may impact their interactions with their students is important. Based upon their responses my findings show that these teachers want to do their best and support their students as much as possible. With this spirit in mind, I would suggest teachers do reading or attend training around implicit bias, to build awareness around how their background might impact their perspectives and practices with refugee students.

Finally, these findings are suggestive of the impact of structural barriers. Lack of training, lack of support professionals, lack of funding or funding priorities, and lack of guidance around SEL and messaging are all problems that impact refugee girls' educational equity. More research into how issues relating to equity of experience impacts refugee girls' educational needs and experiences of SEL is also vital to understanding how to better support teachers.

Data availability: The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Declaration of interest: The authors declared that there were no potential conflicts of interest.

Ethical statement: Ethical approval was granted by the University of York Department of Education ethics committee on 19th October 2021.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Introductory:

1. How many years have you been a primary school teacher?
2. What is your experience teaching social and emotional skills to the refugee or migrant student population?
3. What type of (both SEL and Refugee/Migrant) training or support is provided for teachers in your school, if any?

Let's talk about Social and Emotional Learning

4. How does SEL fit into your typical day? Probe: curriculum, assessments, planning periods.
5. Could you share your experience of creating, planning, or modifying your lessons to address refugee and migrant emotional needs?
6. In what situations does a refugee or migrant student's social-emotional skills support their learning? What about hindering their learning?

Let's talk about working specifically with refugee and migrant children

7. What do you find are the differences in the language, behaviours, and social skills of refugee and migrant students from those of non-refugee or migrant students? (thinking specifically about social and emotional expression).
8. Given your experience, what do you find are the differences and/or similarities between the social and emotional needs of refugee and migrant girls and boys?

Can you tell me...

9. Does your school work with community partners to support refugee students? (Is there a system to refer students who might need additional support emotionally?)
10. What would be your advice to a new teacher who will have a new student from a refugee or migrant family?
11. What could be done differently at your school that would have been helpful to you?

***Added:** 12: The Department for Education has recently come out with new guidance what do you think about it?